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Retooling the Concept of Information Service Provision: Imperatives for Libraries in Developing Countries in Times of Pandemic

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Abstract

The quest to adapt information services from the traditional library context to one that is digital for efficiency, relevance, and sustainability of the library profession in developing countries prompted the paper. From a comparative viewpoint, the competitiveness of two information provision models (traditional and digital—social media) was discussed, considering the mediating role of technology. The prospect and viability of the latter over and above the former as an efficient and responsive model of information service provision during and after pandemic were highlighted with the aid of statistics. The paper proposed that the identification of core library patrons, acceptance of the broken monopoly of the library as an information provider, the development of a variety of information services, implementing social media and making services audience and device-specific, the building of social media community, etc. as key strategies for transforming the surviving libraries into thriving ones. The paper concluded with some benefits accruing to libraries in less developed countries that are operating the traditional model if the proposed strategies are proactively implemented.

Keywords: Social media, Traditional library, Covid-19, Pandemic, Information service provision

Introduction

There is a consensus among LIS professionals that service provision is the hallmark of the library profession; however, there are divergent methods of packaging and communicating the service due to the emergence of ICT, its attendant proliferation, rate of diffusion across sectors, and the extent of digital citizenship among others. These factors have resulted in the development of

various service provision models that have continued to assume more complex dimensions. Presently, communication (i.e., verbal, non-verbal, written, or visual) is greatly redundant if the essence is not to disseminate information. A more efficient way of achieving this is through the use of technology. Thus, information service provision is now a blend of technology, man, and data (Zazi, 2010). Whereas the term could mean the dissemination of processed or unprocessed information, a more comprehensive description would capture the channel of dissemination. Consequently, information service provision is operationalized as the transmission and management of man's documented intellectual output by those trained to do so with the aid of relevant technology.

Despite the existing and potential benefits modern technology offers the LIS profession, critics are of the view that if the primary function of the library is information dissemination, the Internet has extinguished its usefulness. One of the technological tools strengthening this argument in recent times is social media. Its acceptance has continued to gain prominence among individuals and organizations seeking a place in the digital realm (Steinfeld et al., 2012). With the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and its attendant restrictions, the popularity of social media as a veritable means of communication is receiving greater attention. For example, Pérez-Escoda, et al (2020) asserted, "As a consequence of the pandemic, social media is becoming the platform of choice for public opinions, perceptions, and attitudes towards various events or public health policies regarding Covid-19". Furthermore, social media analytics has been reported as an efficient technique for capturing the attitudes and perceptions of the public during the pandemic (Yigitcanlar et al., 2020) and a catalyst for quality decision-making and risk behavior (Al-Dmour, et al., 2020).

Whereas evidence abounds that libraries in the developed economies leverage social media to widen their patron-base and remain relevant in the information provision business (Xie & Stevenson, 2014), the narrative contrast significantly in the less developed countries (Ziaie, 2013), where the argument about library usefulness appears valid. More than a decade ago, it was reported that the majority of African libraries are in real crisis with an unclear future (Ogunsola, 2011). This assertion was premised on the low rate of technology deployment by libraries in the region. According to the author, if nothing changes, technology will foster the death of traditional librarianship in the region. Whether or not the emergence of Covid-19 and its restriction protocols will initiate or expedite the actual demise of the libraries due to their unresponsiveness in times of restrictions on physical movement is not certain. However, this paper proposes that efficient deployment of relevant social media tools will remedy the image crisis confronting libraries in developing countries especially as a result of Covid-19.

Justification

The unresponsive nature and over-reliance on routine manual operations, the need to eliminate/minimize physical trips to the library facility and embrace a paradigm that promises 'anytime' and 'anywhere' access to a wider range of information resources and services (Bamgbade et al., 2015) are among the flaws inherent in the traditional library system. Thus, a more inclusive and adaptive information provision model that is responsive during and after emergencies/pandemics becomes expedient. The emergence and proliferation of ICT brought with them a decline in preference for libraries and librarians both as sources of information and

advocates of information for researchers, respectively (Dickson & Holley, 2010). Earlier, it was reported that information users begin their search for information with search engines, with no reference to the library as a starting point (OCLC, 2006). An overwhelming preference for information disseminated through social media over other conventional platforms has also been observed (Howard et al., 2018). If these empirical claims emanated from the U.S., what does the future hold for libraries in the less developed regions? What can be done to ensure the latter brace up for relevance towards reclaiming its lost ‘territories’ and confidence reposed in it as an information provider? This is the crux of this paper.

The Traditional Library Concept of Information Service Provision

The traditional library system is characterized by manual methods of processing physical records and services from the point of acquisition to transmission to the end-users. It emphasizes a centralized, physically assembled information stock where usage requires a physical visit to the library (Kaur, 2015). From the context of relevance, librarians in this environment are often quick to point out, in defense, the benefits that the traditional library system offers. It has been debated that there is a greater control mechanism in the traditional library system over what comes into the library than it is in the digital environment (O’Brien, 2018), where publishers reserved the right to add or withdraw titles from digital resource packages without external input. It has been reported that only about 57.5% of essential academic titles are available digitally (Rao et al., 2016). Earlier, it was submitted that despite the ongoing digitization efforts, the relevance of the traditional library system cannot be outlived because only an insignificant amount of what has been published since writing began is available on the Internet (Remelts, 2005). Furthermore, no technological competence or IP address management and authentication/user ID setups are required for gaining access to resources and services in the traditional setting. Also in the traditional system, once resources are acquired, they are owned forever. Other bottlenecks associated with the digital environment like incompatibility of software/hardware, licensing/legal issues, and publishers’ business models (Walter, 2013) appear to favor traditional librarianship. The argument notwithstanding, the traditional library system is often criticized for several reasons.

The rigidity and unresponsive nature of the system during emergencies and unfavorable weather conditions confine patrons to physically accessible resources and services. Thus, the system became moribund and inaccessible to patrons during the first-wave of Covid-19 lockdown, with the same evidence being recorded in certain climes where the second-wave is leading to shutdowns. Lending policies have been observed to pose further restrictions to access to information resources and services (Abbas & Faiz, 2013). Once collections are built and services developed, it becomes the responsibility of patrons to take advantage of them — no deliberate efforts to induce use or increase patronage due to its lack of competitiveness. The attention required in the preservation of highly combustible physical records and their vulnerability to deterioration and other forms of catastrophes is another concern of the system. Shelving arrangements, record-keeping, charging processes, organization of knowledge under this system are time-consuming and labor-intensive (Ashikuzzaman, 2016).

The Social Media Concept of Information Service Provision

With the advent of technology, users of information have not only increased astronomically but their information needs and modes of satisfying them have also become elastic, dynamic, complex. Although the emergence of technological innovations like social media created this *phenomenon*, conscious deployment of the same technology offers significant solutions. Whereas this assertion reinforces why libraries in the developed economies continue to *thrive* and remain relevant (despite the obvious encroachments into the library's statutory functions by allied disciplines), it also validates the continued *survival* of libraries in the less developed regions in terms of decline in patronage, relevance and impact.

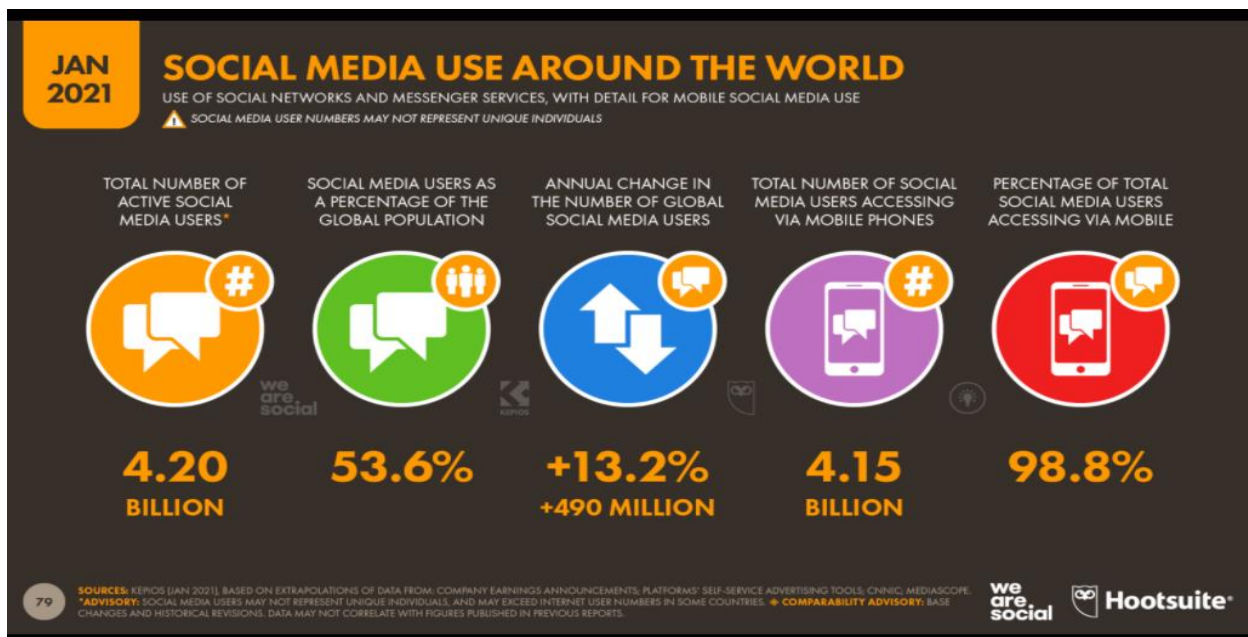


Fig. Global social media usage statistics (DataReportal, January 2021)

The emergence of social media has transformed the library from being a 'repository of knowledge to a 'facilitator of communication and collaboration' (Bell et al., 2015), with libraries becoming more of 'connections' of people, information, and technology than 'collection' of resources (Hielmcrone et al, 2012). It has been reported that digital technology transforms clients' habits (Lund, 2021). The author further found that organizations that transform their services digitally have clients who are six times more likely to patronize new products and services from their desired brand. With the use of blogs, libraries facilitate speedy interaction with patrons and timely dissemination of library news and providing web links to resources and services. Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social networking sites have been identified as veritable platforms for academic activities like class projects/assignments/presentations, group discussion (Muruli & Gireesh, 2013), and marketing/publicizing library services. RSS aggregators are suitable for current awareness services and selective dissemination of information (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). As an information-laden environment (Kronqvist-Berg, 2014) that helps to build enduring communities of patron, social media helps to minimize patrons' physical visits to the library facility due to its flexibility of engagement. The advantages/benefits notwithstanding,

social media experience is evolving and challenges such as the authenticity of information, users' privacy, false identity, and lack of control mechanism (Izuagbe, et al., 2019a) have been leveled against the platform.

Distribution of social media applications and their monthly active users

S/N	Social Media Application	Monthly Active Users
1	Facebook	2.740 billion
2	Twitter	353 million
3	Instagram	1.221 billion
4	Pinterest	442 million
5	Snapchat	498 million
6	YouTube	2.291 billion
7	Reddit	430 million
8	WhatsApp	2 billion
9	Quora	300 million
10	WeChat	1.213 billion
11	Weibo	511 million
12	Telegram	500 million
13	Massager	1.3 billion
14	TikTok	689 million

DataReportal (January 2021)

The figure presents data that lent credence to the growing popularity of social media use. Globally, 4.20 billion (53.6%) (i.e., more than half of the world population), are active social media users. Of these figures, 4.15 billion (98.8%) access the platform using mobile devices. Similarly, an annual increment in social media usage is estimated to be over 490 million (+13.2%). The breakdown in the Table reveals that Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp are the most utilized platforms, with Facebook topping the distribution. Furthermore, statistics indicate that 9 out of 10 Internet users use social media and a typical social media user has an account on more than 8 different social media platforms and spends an average of 2.5 hours on social media per day (DataReportal, 2021). From these data, are there opportunities that libraries could leverage? What percentage of these figures can the library harness for its advantage? Are there ways library services can be adapted and made accessible to a wider audience? These are some of the issues the paper seeks to address.

Strategies for retooling library services

1. Accept the new normal

Librarians must realize that the monopoly of being the sole provider of information that the traditional library enjoyed some decades ago has been broken. The study of OCLC (2006) revealed that the library was not mentioned as a starting point for students who seek information among the options listed. If this was the case in 2006 (when ICT was not as developed as it is currently), librarians should expect today's patrons to be more exposed to sources of information and ways

of accessing them without the assistant of a *middleman* now than ever before. In the digital economy, clients are the ones in the driver's seat (Lund, 2021).

2. Identify and understand your audience

Information is a slippery term that means different things to different people as well as the sources it resides in. This is an indication that each library is established for a defined user community. The collection development policies of libraries (where they are available) usually spell out whom the library and its services are designed. Librarians should therefore be guided by this framework to identify their core patrons to streamline effort and services for maximum output and impact. For patron focused service, librarians must first, understand the digital disposition of their user and objectively embrace the reality that they have outgrown what is physically made available to them; they now know what they want, the way they want it, where they want it, and how to use it (Izuagbe et al., 2019b).

3. Develop a variety of services

The twenty-first-century information consumer is interested in a wide range of information services. According to Igwe (2017), the use of library social media platforms is not all about information; other interesting digital contents also elicit use. Social media is a hypermedia domain that permits/supports a variety of information that cuts across academic, socio-economic, politics, religion, entertainment, etc., that can be shared in different formats. Therefore, the more the information services vary, the more likely they will use them because it provides them with a wide range of service options. However, librarians must first, research into patrons' information service preferences, identify and make provision for them. The awareness among patrons that their information needs have been provided, would create the impression that their needs are appreciated.

4. Implement relevant social media tools and make services audience and device-specific

Librarians should identify information services and the relevant social media tools with which they can be communicated to patrons and implement them. Next, librarians need to ascertain the most utilized social media channels for accessing specific information and adapt services. Statistically, it was reported in early 2020 that 3.2 billion (94.1%) out of the 3.4 billion active users of social media accessed the medium using smartphones (Statusbrew, 2020). These figures have increased to 4.20 billion and 4.15 billion (98.8%) in January 2021(DataReportal, 2021), respectively. This is an indication that mobile phone is the most utilized device for accessing the information on social media. If this applies to library patrons as well, adopting mobile services automatically put the library where their users are, vice versa.

5. Build a social media community

Building an engaging/enduring social media community is a good way to demonstrate relevance as it makes patrons feel part of the library community. Again, librarians will need to determine the type of social media channel that is most effective and useful to the community. Libraries may

also design user-friendly apps that expedite access to resources and services, thereby creating a point of convergence for communication. The inclusion of URLs to resources and services should consciously feature on the library's social media websites. When the process is well-coordinated and proactively deployed, it increases the library patron-base and ensures members' loyalty.

6. Designate social media savvy librarians

Building a social media community is not as important as growing and keeping it strong. To accelerate all activities on the library's social media platforms, persons trained in the act of information management who are technology or social media proficient should be designated to man the platforms on a real-time basis to enhance communication efficiency. Among other things, these individuals will be charged with the responsibility of creating library social media accounts for registered patrons and classifying them into appropriate groups to disseminate group-based information.

7. Follow them

Followership on social media is reciprocal. Sharing of posts and providing updates on trending or topical issues (depending on the demographic disposition of the users) across sectors will ensure high user-engagement on a real-time basis. The assurance that libraries have what patrons want automatically endears them to the libraries. Howard et al. (2018) found that the majority of students sampled in their study would prefer to see their libraries on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Earlier, a similar finding was reported from the Zambian context where more than 80% of the respondents strongly supported the use of social media tools in the library (Chitumbo, 2015). This implies that the respondents would be interested in being followed-up on those channels. Until this is ascertained, the gesture of *following* may not be reciprocated.

Benefits for Libraries in the Developing Countries

The proposed strategies, if implemented, have implications for libraries operating the traditional model in the following areas:

1. Adapting and making information services social media-compliant automatically removes the appellation "traditional" from libraries operating the conventional model thereby giving them a digital, professional, and global relevance.
2. It has been predicted that about 90% of library patrons would be meeting their information needs from non-library-related sources and physical space used for non-library-related functions (University Leadership Council, 2011). Conscious and proactive deployment of relevant social media tools will address and nullify this prediction.
3. From the academic standpoint, the use of social media will improve the professional image of academic libraries in terms of interaction and foster liaison operations with the various departmental Heads in their institutions.
4. The debate about relevance, social rejection, and the eventual demise of the library profession would become a nullity because the libraries would have become more

competitive and responsive to the information needs of patrons during and after emergencies/pandemics that limit physical movement.

5. The concerned libraries will be strategically positioned to take information services to the doorstep of a wider audience through conscious marketing of information products and services, thereby bringing to an end the age-long practice of waiting-for-patrons' physical presence for service transaction to occur.
6. It is challenging nowadays for researchers to keep track of scientific development/discourse due to the enormity of the avalanche of literature and information in circulation. Thus, several scholarly communication platforms (i.e., conferences, workshops, seminars) are currently being complemented by relevant social media tools like LinkedIn, ResearchGate, Academia.edu (Persson & Svenningsson, 2017), Almetric, Mendeley, Orcid, Google Scholar, etc. These platforms help researchers increase visibility and citation by reaching a wider audience with their research findings (Van Noorden, 2014; Bik & Goldstein, 2013). Since citation is a key measure of research impact, libraries could therefore create or subscribe to relevant academic, social media platforms to further publicize the academic and scholarly publications emanating from the institutions they belong, for the benefit of authors and institutions' rankings.

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